

**Naval Historical Center  
Oral Interview Summary Form**

**Interviewers:**

CAPT(s) Michael McDaniel  
Mr. Gary Weir

**Interviewer's Organization:**

Navy Combat Documentation Det 206  
Navy Historical Center

**Interviewee:**

LCDR David Tarantino

**Current Address:**

OSD

**Date of Interview:**

25 Sept 2001

**Place of Interview:**

Navy Annex

**Number of Cassettes:**

One (Digital)

**Security Classification:**

Unclassified

**Name of Project:** Pentagon Terrorist Attack Incident

**Subject Terms/Key Words:** Pentagon; Terrorist Attack; 11 September 2001; triage; evacuation; lessons learned; Defense Protective Service; FBI; carnage; Navy Command Center; renovation

**Abstract of Interview:**

Note: This subject is a family practice naval physician and a member of a multi-generation navy family. Note his possibly valuable lessons learned "ship" metaphor at the end of the interview.

1. Worked for OSD in the Peace keeping and Humanitarian Affairs Office [Dr. Joseph Collins]. He was involved in international humanitarian programs and disaster relief.
2. Fourth floor of the A Ring between corridors 4 and 5. His office was in the direct path of the aircraft but separated from the full impact by the B ring.
3. His office was aware of the WTC attacks. His office looked at the CNN video via their computers.
4. When he emerged from his office he observed a general evacuation underway.
5. He had to moisten paper towels in order to breathe when he elected to head to the fourth corridor to help with the injured. He had to crawl to make progress because of the smoke. Most of the "walking wounded" were moving into the central Pentagon courtyard because it presented the easiest egress.
6. He witnessed intense smoke, aircraft debris [8:01], human remains, and fire – at the open air space between the B and the C Rings on the inner aspect of the C Ring where there was a huge open exploded hole between corridors 4 and 5.

7. Some extinguishers were available, but no smoke hoods, little knowledge of immediate exit possibilities. He penetrated into the severely damaged area in response to human voices. Using a wet T-shirt to beat back the fire. Loose and melting debris presented a hazard as he and Captain Thomas tried to free a trapped retired naval officer [Capt Jerry Henson]. They were successful in the rescue.

8. He was aware of an evacuation plan for fire but no specific disaster plan training or procedure to his knowledge. Very little panic, security was on site and providing some direction, assumption that the chain of command was working but offered no evidence as he was preoccupied with the events inside the Pentagon and at the inner courtyard.

9. Lessons-learned observations:

- Witnessed “honor, courage, commitment” first hand
- He felt that a physician had to react
- When you make eye contact with a helpless victim you can’t simply do nothing
- Treat the building like a ship – evacuate non-essential personnel, train fire control and damage teams to reduce the casualties, better personal protection for damage control personnel and for office workers. [27:00 +]

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**Subject Terms/Key Words:** Pentagon Rescue; Medical Care; Award; Navy Command Center; Pentagon; Terrorist Attack; 11 September 2001; Triage; Lessons Learned

**Transcript of Interview:**

Interviewee Information:

LCDR Tarentino was born in [REDACTED]. His father was a career Navy supply officer. Attended Stanford University and Georgetown Medical School on the Navy scholarship. Entered flight surgery program in Pensacola. Assigned to an FA-18 squadron in MCAS El Toro. Did his Family Practice residency training at Bremerton Washington and was assigned to the Naval Hospital in Naples Italy. Assigned to the Office of the Secretary of Defense in Peacekeeping and Humanitarian Affairs Office. He is in the International and Humanitarian Assistance as a Disaster Relief Specialist.

Topics Discussed:

Q. (3:00) Tell us about the physical location of your office.

A. My office is on the fourth floor of the A ring between the fourth and fifth corridors. It was essentially in the direct path of the aircraft, but separated by the B ring. We weren't directly impacted but felt a violent shudder and our office is still inaccessible because of smoke and fire and water damage.

Q. In your particular role to whom did you report? What was your chain of command?

A. My boss is the Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Peacekeeping and Humanitarian affairs, Dr. Joe Collins.

Q. (03:41) Who reported to you? In other words who were you caring for in the chain of command when you were there?

A. It's a pretty flat organization. We had a couple of interns. We have people kind of subject matter specialists in certain areas and that's kind of it.

Q. (04:07) On any given day in your command, what sort of issues do you deal with every day?

Those basically that you described earlier, but can you be just a little bit more specific perhaps?

A. We're currently working on migration planning for the Caribbean, the possibility of caring for migrants. The annual proposals by all the regional commands for their humanitarian assistance projects for Fiscal Year (FY) 02. Reviewing and discussing and improving those and working on issues such as that.

Q. (4:42) Can you give us kind of broad brush or actually some details of how the office complex, how the office is set up?

A. It's just one long row of cubicles basically, and it was a temporary office structure rigged up during the renovation program.

Q. (5:10) Take us through your morning of the 11th September. Kind of walk us through your day up to the incident.

A. Normal day, reported to work, started logging into computer, checking emails, taking phone calls. Talking with the office about what's going on.

Q. (5:20) What time did you get in that morning?

A. Probably about 7:30, or no probably eight o'clock.

Q. Did you drive in that morning?

A. No, Metro.

Q. (5:31) Most of your office in that early?

A. Yeah, I think everyone was there. We were alerted or heard about the on-goings at the World Trade Center, about the first plane. Called it up on our computer screen had a link somehow so we were able to watch live video. Saw the footage of the second aircraft going into the second tower. We were just having general discussions about what this and might mean. Wasn't too much longer after that where we felt a violent shudder and a loud explosion and looked at each other and pretty much kind of made the implicit assumption that we were under some sort of attack.

Everyone said, "We better get out of here! We got to get out of here!"

So we started heading out. Obviously, a lot of people out in the corridors were evacuating as well. I kind of stopped and started to think obviously I have medical training. Perhaps I should go to the site and see if there's some injured people around. I was thinking about offering

medical assistance. I went towards where I kind of assessed things were happening and I went down the fourth corridor and already, it's a long corridor because they go from the inner courtyard to the outer courtyard, were full of smoke there from ceiling to floor and there were people egressing from there. You'd see some walking wounded coming out. There was confusion down there.

I grabbed paper towels and moistened them. People said yes there's injured people down there. I started trying to head down there, but you literally had to crawl, really on your belly. Even on your hands and knees you could barely breathe the smoke was so thick. Crawled down feeling along the wall and was able to assist on a couple floors going down from floor to floor getting some people to the inner courtyard who were prevented from getting out to the inter courtyard, I don't know if they thought to come to the inter courtyard, or if they were injured or dazed and confused. I was able to assist on hands and knees to get them to the inter courtyard. I went back in and found myself in the open air space between the B and C ring on the inner aspect of the C ring, between the 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> corridors. There was a big exploded hole in the wall that was pouring out thick black smoke, there was a big plane tire sitting there, evidence of human remains and heard cries for help from inside this wall. This was not an exit through which people could come. The doors were 20 yards either way, they were spewing out thick, black smoke. A couple of people exited there. But we heard these cries in here. They were trapped. So four or five people grabbed fire extinguishers and started kind of fighting our way into this exploded breach.

Made a serpentine path through there throwing out some degree, spraying back the fire, and as we did that came into a space where two Navy personnel were trapped. They were very close to succumbing to smoke and flames. We were able to get them though this makeshift passageway.

They would have certainly perished in there. They didn't know that there was even a possibility of exit this way because it's usually a wall. They told us there were more people in there and CAPT DAVE THOMAS and I continued on in further in this area. At this point in this area there were live electrical wires. I got shocked twice. It's so hot that the debris is melting and dripping off the ceiling onto your skin and it would sear your skin and melt your uniform. We went a little farther, turned a corner and came into this bombed out office space that was a roaring inferno of destruction and smoke and flames and intense heat you could feel searing your face. We thought we heard something else off to the right. Somehow I had a flashlight, I don't know if someone handed it to me or if DAVE THOMAS handed it to me. I shined it through this little opening and saw this bruised and bloody head of this gentleman who was leaning back saying, "Help me! Help me!"

Tried to get him to, I had a moistened t-shirt that I was using to help beat back the flames a little bit. I threw that into him and told him to breathe through that and told him he had to get out of there we had to go. Because this place, there's secondary explosions going on, the structure's collapsing, stuffs falling from the ceiling, the flames are approaching and he's pinned by this debris that's on fire. On the side of him there's not flames but on the other side is all flames, so he doesn't have long at all. It looks like he's drifting in and out of consciousness from his injuries or oxygen deprivation.

We tried to free some of the debris from where we were but it really couldn't be done just based on the configuration so I crawled down, I crawled along on the, I had to get on my belly and crawl on my hands and knees and crawl along over this debris down into this cramped space where he was.

I said “I’m a doctor, I’m here to help. We’re going to get you out of here, but you have to help yourself. You’ve got to fight your way out.”

He said, “I can’t, I’m pinned. I’ve been trying and trying. I can’t move.”

I tried to pull him. I tried to push. There was nothing I could do. I myself was very close to succumbing to the fumes and smoke and I don’t know how he was even still alive because he had been there for awhile. He was losing strength quickly so out of desperation I kind of laid on my back kind of underneath him and I put my feet up on the pile of debris over his head and I leg pressed up as hard as I could and I was able to raise it a few inches just enough to free him a little bit so he could start to wiggle free. I kind of grabbed him. He grabbed onto me, kind of pulled him out, right through my legs. I told him not to knock my legs off, because I didn’t want it to come back down again. He crawled right over my body, we were almost face to face and I said “Is anyone else in here that you know of?”

He said, “Yes, I think there are others.”

So I was obviously distressed to hear that. I pushed him on past me and pushed him out and that’s where CAPTAN THOMAS grabbed him and escorted him outside. Hearing that there might be others I was still holding up this debris and yelling “Is there anyone else in here, is there anyone else in here?”

I tried that for a little while. I could hear people yelling from the outside to “Get out of there. Get out of there!” Not hearing that there was anyone else in there I lowered the debris, hoping it would stop and it did, and then I kind of rolled over and crawled out and made my way out. I got outside, and a few people were standing about. They had already taken JERRY HENSON to the courtyard.



Q. (12:43) That's who that was?

A. The victim was JERRY HENSON, the third victim who was pinned by this debris. He's a retired Navy Captain and he's Navy personnel works in whatever Navy office that was. I came out and was coughing and wrenching, and trying to catch my breath. It seemed like less than 60 seconds before that whole space was just engulfed in smoke and flames going all the way up the side of the building. I gathered myself and went in to the courtyard where there a few casualties. Some people from the clinic, some medical personnel from the clinic had brought up medical supplies. There was a corpsman tending to MR. HENSON, trying to get some first aid started and I went in and kind of supervised assisted getting oxygen on him, starting some IV's, getting fluids going, getting vital signs, and triaging the few casualties that were there, and determining MR. HENSON was the worst off, mostly from respiratory distress. Insured that he got loaded first on an ambulance and got him sent on his way.

For the rest of day I went back to the scene of where we were hoping that perhaps the fire crews would arrive and maybe in that area we could rescue some more people. But they arrived not too much longer after that and they were unable to penetrate any of these spaces even with their gear. I had no protective gear. They had their full gear. By then the conditions had deteriorated, they couldn't go in. So we kept waiting and waiting hoping there would be more people to assist but it really didn't turn out to be the case. So I just spent the rest of the day becoming part of the triage apparatus and standing by with the fire crews in case they needed some assistance. Helped point out and identify human remains to the FBI, because they collected them as evidence. That was it for the rest of the day, really.

Q. (14:43) In your effort to penetrate to MR HENSON, how many people were with you? How many people were able to assist you in moving him out? Was anybody else near you besides yourself and DAVE THOMAS?

A. On the initial penetration efforts, I believe there were four to five people. But when we got back into the space where the people were trapped and where MR. HENSON was it was only CAPT THOMAS and myself. There were three people, JERRY, after the other two people came out, into the deepest space - two people went in there, CAPT THOMAS and myself.

Q. (15:31) The way you described the procedure that you used, it's obvious that MR. THOMAS and you worked well together and you were able to set up a situation where you could move this gentleman out with some swiftness oddly enough given the awkward situation you were in. What about a disaster plan? When you walked into your office that morning, and you said you were discussing with your fellows some of the events going on in New York City not expecting that it was about to happen to you as well, did you reflect on the fact whether there was a disaster plan in place perhaps where people know what to do if that shutter, which indeed happened, did happen?

A. I was aware of an evacuation plan like in the case of a fire or whatever. I wouldn't be expected to be part of a disaster plan where I was working, because I don't think the medical clinic was even really aware of the fact that there was a doctor in this other job. I'm sure that the Medical Department in the Clinic at the Pentagon, I'm sure there is some kind of plan there and they had started setting up triage operations and the like. I don't know if there's some overarching ones. I wouldn't be expected to be a part of it.

Q. (16:48) So the people in the office, they were not trained in ways to react to this or something like it?

A. In my office? No, I think the expectation was to evacuate.

Q. (17:03) Did you see in the events that happened shortly after the shudder any office in your area reacting in a way that seemed to indicate that there were people trained to perform certain roles in situations of this sort, and had indicated that to you?

A. I really couldn't say. That's not what I was thinking about or looking at.

Q. (17:30) Did it seem rather chaotic to you when you came out into the hall?

A. Well, it depends on your definition of chaotic. It's not routine for the building to be evacuating. People weren't clambering over people and you know stepping on people's back and fighting their way to the exits. It was a relatively orderly exit. As they got closer to the site of the devastation, if you define chaos as an exploded building that's collapsing and burning and on fire and there's people screaming and there's body parts around, that's chaotic. But were people running around panicked? No. Most people were evacuating certainly, but there was, I think there was security people around, and they were establishing triage operations and things.

Q. (18:25) In your opinion was the chain of command working in spite of the difficult circumstances in which it was place?

A. You mean the chain of command for the national military command?

Q. (18:40) No, for as far as you were able to see and the things that you acted upon and in the environment that you were in, did you see a chain of command working to bring as much order to that situation as it possibly could at that time?

A. Where I was I'm sure they were coordinating things from wherever they're doing that, and as people evacuated I'm sure they were told to do certain things, and collected in certain areas. But I was in the epicenter of the destruction and there weren't all that many other people there. The rescue crews were on their way. Things like that were starting to happen. As things progressed they set up and I was on the inside the entire time. I never even went to the outside of the Pentagon and saw what happened until that evening. I'm sure there was all kind of stuff going on outside but I was on the inside and in the inner courtyard which was a probably a smaller operation

Q. (19:55) I'm sure it's a large building with a lot of people, but did you see any people that kind of rose to areas of leadership? Or kind of people that you might have knowm, office workers, other that you saw doing things?

A. I saw various people from all ranks and all services trying to help. In the courtyard a large number of people from all ranks and services stayed to offer assistance and to manage triage situations, or be litter bearers. Unfortunately it never really came to that because the conditions were too deteriorated to really go in and mount a real rescue operation.

Q. (20:45) What was going through your mind?

A. All kinds of things. The effect on the world, the effect on the US, the effect on the military. This was catastrophic because we already knew about the World Trade Center. Wondering what

else was going on. For all we knew at first, I maybe, perhaps having more education on these things than others I didn't know, if this was potentially a chemical or biological attack. We didn't know if there were more attacks. We knew there were two on the World Trade Center. People were saying well there's going to be a second one on the Pentagon, rumors circulate around. Didn't know the extent of the damage, because I was only working in one small area. Didn't know if other sites were being attacked, military sites or US sites, couldn't be certain my family was safe. Overarching all of that was the fact that I know there were people dying in there, right in where I was, dead and dying that we couldn't get to.

Q. (21:50) How did you finally reach your family.

A. I didn't call them for several hours because I was kind of busy with these efforts. So they went through a longer period than a lot. Obviously some had worse than that, but when I finally did call my wife and my mother from a phone that was in a little room off the courtyard, obviously they were very relieved. They'd been worried because you know they thought if everything was all right they would have heard from me right away, so when I did call them I think it was one o'clock or something. I was able to relieve their concerns.

Q. (22:33) Can you tell us about the phone call?

A. It was very short because there were other people who wanted to use the phone. I was still trying to help out. I just told my wife that she didn't have to worry, that I'm fine that I was helping out and that I'm safe and I love her, and I'll talk to her more later. I said pretty much the same thing to my mom. I made those two calls.

Q. (22:56) Do you have children?

A. Nope.

Q. (23:04) When you were in the office with your colleagues before the Pentagon was hit and you witnessed the World Trade Center circumstance, and you mentioned to us that you were reflecting on what this meant and that was brought home with greater ferocity by the Pentagon attack, what were the initial impressions about what this meant before you were hit. What was some of the conversation like? What were people saying other than the obvious epithets they were throwing at the terrorist?

A. People were obviously speculating as to who might have been behind it. This is all speculation, everyone knows that the obvious first object of suspicion would be Osama bin Laden and everyone knows that he's harbored in Afghanistan and everyone knows that there's an oppressive regime there and so you put two and two together and you have to start thinking about what might be our response, or what might this be drawing us into or what might this mean. Along those lines.

Q. (24:09) How many people worked in your office?

A. Nine. They all made it out safely.

Q. (24:21) Glad to hear that. Within your office when the initial shudder took place and people felt something was very, very wrong and an evacuation was the right avenue where did the first suggestion to evacuate and to be careful about doing it and all the rest where did that first suggestion come from do you recall? Who said let's go, or was it general consensus.

A. That was the general consensus in our office. But I think also almost simultaneous there were sirens going off. Or maybe even recorded voice as part of it saying evacuate the building or something like that. I can't be certain but it seemed like, people in my office didn't need that to tell them to do that anyway but it seemed that both things were there.

Q. (25:10) How long before you knew exactly what had happened, what had caused the shudder? You mention you saw an aircraft tire, were you aware prior to that time that it was probably a plane?

A. That was in the back of my mind. I went through different things. I didn't know if this was bomb or plane or what. At the very first I thought this could be just a coincidence, maybe just a floor collapsed from the renovation. As I got closer I could see that that obviously wasn't the case and then when I saw a plane tire that was a pretty definitive push to the supposition that this was a plane crashed purposely into the Pentagon just like at the World Trade Center.

Q. (26:12) What are some of the things that you've learned about yourself from this?

A. I don't know, I haven't thought about myself a tremendous amount. There has been a lot of media activity since this. People have been interested in my activities and things like that. I learned the importance of some of the values we learn in the Navy. It was never fashionable to really talk about honor, courage, and commitment which we learn. Seeing the guys trying to help. And JERRY HENSON a retired pilot from Vietnam he flew 80 missions, learning about a guy like that and having him thanking me.

Q. (27:10) Have you spend some time with him since?

A. Yes. It's obviously a life, a memorable experience just being involved in things like that. I don't know if it really mean anything about me. I went in first to help, because I had medical training. I didn't sign up for a rescue effort. When you hear people crying for help you can't turn away. When you find yourself way deep inside this space and you make eye contact with a guy and you might not want to crawl in there. And things may be kind of horrible but you can't leave him.

Q. (27:49) In your opinion as not only a doctor but also as a naval officer, what lessons learned would you take from this in terms of trying to prepare people for disasters in building of this sort in the future? Terrorist aren't apt to go away soon unfortunately, no matter how we'd like to wish them away and no matter what actions we take against them. I think it would be valuable if you've reflected on it at all, in the short time that you've had, especially as a medical professional and as somebody who witnessed this first hand what this can do. What sort of preparation, what sort of routine training might your ask both civilian and military and naval facilities to go through in order to make it a little better in awful circumstances like this to try to get them out and save them? What would you do? Have you reflected on that at all?

A. I think, perhaps, if you treat a building like a ship and if you have drills. Ordinarily, you wouldn't think of trying to save a building, who cares, like you save a ship. But obviously, the people are important. You might have fire control team or damage control teams who are trained and identified. Certainly, the bulk of people should leave but maybe there should be teams that are trained to at least attempt some rescue efforts in a safe fashion, and have the tools that they would need. One thing that would have helped us would have been some sort of respiratory protection, or some sort of masks. I suffered relatively significant smoke inhalation. I know



CAPT THOMAS did as well. Maybe we could have done more if we had had more of those things on hand. We may have to change our mentality a little bit where sure in a small fire that starts in some office, okay, you leave and let the fire department handle it. But if people are trapped, maybe we can save some and maybe we should be ready for that.

Q. (29:59) I was on a SSBN recently and they showed me the various fire emergency procedures they went through, everything from the hood all the way through to the air ports that you can lock into it as you went along, and some of the procedures they were using. I was wondering whether you were going to reflect on ship procedures. That's valuable. Thank you very much because coming from a professional like yourself that's the kind of input that people should act on.

Q. (30:30) Can you think of any others we need to talk to?

A. I saw people but I don't know who they were. CAPT THOMAS, without a doubt. And when you do see him, please tell him that I recognize and appreciated his contributions. I think MR. HENSON has been willing to talk. He lost. . . I pretty much had to crawl over his desk mate to get to him who was deceased. So he was really torn up by that. He may or may not be willing to talk. CAPT THOMAS, you need to talk to him.

Q. (31:12) Thanks an awful lot for coming. We really appreciate it.

A. Sure.

Reviewed by:  
Ethel Geary  
3 January 2003